

The New York Times : 'New Light Fixture for a Famous Rotunda, James Turrell Plays With Color at the Guggenheim', by Roberta Smith, June 21, 2013.

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New Light Fixture for a Famous Rotunda James Turrell Plays With Color at the Guggenheim

Roberta Smith



James Turrell's "Aten Reign" installation cycles through the color spectrum in an hour.

James Turrell's exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum will probably be the bliss-out environmental art hit of the summer. This is primarily because of the ravishing "Aten Reign," an immense, elliptical, nearly hallucinatory play of light and color that makes brilliant use of the museum's famed rotunda and ocular skylight. The latest site-specific effort from Mr. Turrell, "Aten Reign" is close to oxymoronic: a meditative spectacle.

The Guggenheim exhibition is one of three now celebrating the art of Mr. Turrell, 70, a leading member of the groundbreaking Light and Space generation of artists that emerged in Los Angeles in the late 1960s. The most comprehensive is at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, while the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston is showing seven works from its collection. The Guggenheim's effort, which has been organized by Carmen Giménez, the museum's formidable curator of 20th-century art, and Nat Trotman, associate curator, is in some ways singularly ambitious, simply because "Aten Reign" is the largest temporary installation Mr. Turrell or the museum has ever undertaken.

Impeccably installed, the exhibition contains, in addition to "Aten Reign," four earlier installation pieces that are just enough to summarize Mr. Turrell's single-minded trajectory. This artist often says that light and space are his materials. The curators have taken him at his word,

editing out his more gimmicky efforts, emptying out the museum and turning it into a spare, unhurried tour of his art. The only other exhibition at the Guggenheim at the moment is “New Harmony: Abstraction Between the Wars, 1919-1939,” a display of often unfamiliar works from the collection that dovetails beautifully with the purity of Mr. Turrell’s art at its best.

“Aten Reign” can make you feel a bit like Richard Dreyfuss on the verge of vindication in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind”: it sometimes suggests the underside of a giant spaceship setting down. Its concentric ellipses of glowing color emanate from an elaborate five-tier structure of white fabric scrims and computerized lights inserted into the rotunda’s cylindrical space by way of considerable engineering expertise and, I assume, a good-size budget. In a short video, available on a new Guggenheim App, one of its designers describes it as a stack of five lampshades seen from the inside.

During a cycle lasting about 60 minutes, “Aten Reign” moves seamlessly and seductively across the color spectrum in slightly saccharin, related shades: mini-spectrums of violet, orange, red, blue, green and a bit too much pink. As it progresses, you may be stunned by the ever-shifting variety of these colors. You may also be reminded of the infinitesimal chromatic gradations on a ring of paint-sample cards. The work’s best moments are actually those with the least color, when the lights are primarily white or when they are shut off altogether. Illuminated only by daylight from the rotunda’s skylight, the piece becomes a symphony of grays.

I like Mr. Turrell’s work well enough. Some of it is breathtakingly beautiful and definitely gives you the heightened sensory experience of seeing yourself see — as is often said both of his efforts and those of other Light and Space artists like Robert Irwin and Ron Cooper. I especially like Mr. Turrell’s skyscapes, small spaces with large, open-to-the-sky apertures and walls lined with tilted benches (which the Guggenheim also has). Aided by artificial lighting, they encourage contemplation of the changing subtleties of sky and light and, if you will, their spiritual implications. One of Mr. Turrell’s best skyscapes is the 1986 “Meeting,” which is constructed into a room on the top floor of MoMA PS 1 in Long Island City. It has the added advantage of avoiding the often free-standing, portentous, tomblike structures that house these pieces.

Although it uses natural light, “Aten Reign” is a more thoroughly artificial skyscape. Spend time watching its fluctuations and you may or may not see God, but you will probably come away with both an enhanced sense of your visual powers and also a new humbleness concerning the world’s visual complexities. As the colors shift, spread and drain, as the tiers seem (but only seem) to alternate between concave and convex or change in width and depth, as you struggle to catch every nuance, you realize how much more there is to perceive than you normally do.

With his Old Testament white beard and Conservative Quaker background, Mr. Turrell sometimes seems a bit too much like a mystical seer. A penchant for oracular statements is evident in the ostentatious catalog to the Los Angeles exhibition, which contains too many floridly colored photographs for an artist who says that photographs can’t do his work justice. On one wall of the Guggenheim he intones that in his work, light “is not the bearer of revelation — it is the revelation.”

But the visionary persona is mainly a result of Mr. Turrell’s still unfinished magnum opus, the Roden Crater, an extinct volcano in Arizona that he started working on in 1979. He has devoted decades and untold sums of money to outfitting its distinctive topography with tunnels, rooms

and skylscapes, reshaping it into an earthwork-cum-naked-eye-observatory that has pharaonic overtones. (As does the title “Aten Reign,” which evokes an Egyptian sun god.)

Photographs of the crater in the catalog to the Los Angeles show suggest that it may be overdone, seeming more temple than observatory in some chambers. It is generally a strange culmination for an artist whose roots lie in the 1960s-early '70s dematerialization of the art object.

Mr. Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943 and came of age at a time when the physical art object was often being jettisoned by artists in favor of language, performance, video or working in the open landscape. His own anti-object tendencies seem to have come into focus so early that there is almost no phase of early paintings or sculptures like those that many members of his generation abandoned as they moved toward more radical art-making.

At Pomona College, he studied perceptual psychology and mathematics. By his early 20s, he was experimenting with natural and artificial light pieces in a former hotel in Santa Monica that he rented for eight years. The works for which he first became known were light projections of sharply defined geometric shapes in darkened spaces, which sometimes read as three-dimensional volumes, and sometimes as flat. Either way they were complete illusions.

At the Guggenheim two projection pieces, “Afrum I (White)” and “Prado (White),” both from 1967, demonstrate the simple beginnings of Mr. Turrell’s art. “Ronin,” from the next year, is an early instance of altered architecture: in one corner of the museum’s High Gallery, a narrow slice of wall has been removed from ceiling to floor, and the exposed cavity has been rounded and lighted; it forms a shaft of astoundingly mysterious white light that seems alternately solid or infinite.

“Iltar,” from 1976, makes a great leap toward “Aten Reign.” It is among the first of what Mr. Turrell calls his “space division constructions”: paintinglike rectilinear cuts in walls that are lighted from without and sometimes within. Here the excision is flanked by just two pairs of 25-watt light bulbs. As your eyes adjust to the darkness, the rectangle first suggests a chalk-smear on a blackboard, then gently roiled white mist and, up close, a snow bank in twilight. The walls near the lights acquire granular textures that almost start to teem.

These visual reveries give the Guggenheim exhibition a surprise ending. As your eyes become alive to both the work’s mysteries and its self-evident simplicity, it is possible to sense a quiet renunciation of “Aten Reign,” with its gorgeous effects and hidden mechanisms. You may not care, but it is there.

“James Turrell” continues through Sept. 25 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.